



Heartbreak in the Heartland

Stockpiled grass, drought conditions fueled wildfires in Texas panhandle.

by Micky Wilson

Across the vast plains of the Texas panhandle, a hot, orange glow blazed on the horizon this spring. Wildfires burned for months, eating up everything in their path.

“Our country was so dry, and we continued to have fires until about three weeks ago,” Joe Van Zandt, a retired Extension educator and rancher from Mobeetie, Texas, said in an interview conducted in mid-April. Mobeetie is located northeast of Amarillo. “I’m on the Mobeetie volunteer fire department, and we went out four days the last week we went out.”

Jay O’Brien, a rancher from Emrill, Texas, said more recently, “The fires have continued into June — mostly in the western Panhandle.”

Both producers shared their experiences with the wildfires.

Losses

Van Zandt, who has a 200-head cow-calf operation on 4,000 acres, lost 1-1/2 miles of fence and 400 acres of grass — 200 acres in late November and 200 acres this spring — to the Texas fires.

“Our personal loss was very minor compared to some of these folks around here that just nearly got totally wiped out,” he says, putting his loss in perspective.

O’Brien lost a total of 10,000 acres of grass and about 15 miles of fence. He says it’s hard to actually calculate how much fence was lost. Oftentimes, only partial fence was burned.

“The problem is that we lost all of some fences, and then we lost corner posts and stay posts where we had fences built on T-posts,” O’Brien says. “Where there were a lot

of wood posts, the heat was so high it made the wire brittle and unusable.”

According to a March 16 release by the Texas Department of Agriculture, more than 10,000 fires burned nearly 4 million acres in the state since late December. “In the Panhandle alone, about 1 million acres have burned,” the release stated. Agricultural Commissioner Susan Combs added, “This is a dire situation, especially where wildfires have rolled across the land, taking 11 human lives in addition to property and livestock.”

The damage continues

Even though the fires have subsided and recent rain has sparked optimism among cattlemen, the weather is still harsh.

“Our soil moisture is totally exhausted,” Van Zandt says. “We had such a dry summer and fall (2005) that we had used up all the moisture there was in our soil profile.”

That means they are starting from scratch, he says. “For usable moisture this year, it’s what falls from the sky.”

Normal annual rainfall for northern Texas is between 16 and 32 inches (in.), while the Panhandle averages 8-16 in. According to a www.texaswaterinfo.net posting on June 24, the High Plains, Low Rolling Plains, North Central, East, Trans Pecos and Edwards Plateau were considered to be in “severe drought,” with a Palmer Drought Severity Index (PDSI) of -4 to -3. PDSI values range from 4 or more (extremely wet) to -4 or less (extreme drought). The South Central, Southern and Lower Valley areas are in “extreme drought.”

During a normal year, Van Zandt will utilize 20 acres per cow. With severe drought conditions, stocking rates decrease, resulting in the need for more acres per cow.

Additional conditions

Stewards of the land, many cattlemen in the area had taken extra care to protect wildlife and stockpile grass in preparation for drought conditions. Unfortunately, the stockpiled grass may have fueled the fire.

“The fires in general were worse because we had good August (2005) rains throughout the Panhandle,” O’Brien comments. “There was a fairly good grass load.” However, the absence of moisture after last August put the Texas Panhandle back into drought conditions.

Dry conditions aided in fueling the fires. But it’s not just the fires that are making pastureland conditions uncomfortable. High, harsh winds that cause blowing sand to shift and reshape the many sand dunes of the Texas Panhandle also dry out the soil.

But Van Zandt says things may be looking up for some of the burned land this spring. “Some of these burned pastures have greened up, and they will get greener now with this very recent rain.

“In two or three months’ time it’s going to be surprising what this old country will look like,” Van Zandt notes optimistically.

O’Brien has also experienced the constantly moving sand, saying, “Where it was extra sandy, we have had some blowing.” The Texas rancher says he is accustomed to burning pastures in the spring — but within a controlled manner as part of a grazing plan.

There are many benefits to controlled burning, as pointed out in “Grassland Management With Prescribed Fire,” published by Nebraska Cooperative Extension. As the Extension guide points out, prescribed fire can increase grass nutritive quality, palatability and availability by removing dead plant material and improving access to new growth. If soil moisture is adequate, yields can be improved since baring and darkening the soil surface allows it to warm more quickly and stimulates earlier growth. Prescribed burning can also suppress unwanted plants and improve wildlife habitat.

“When you do a controlled burn, you plan your grazing so that you can benefit from the burn,” O’Brien says. “This was a hotter fire than what we normally have with controlled burns. Plus, it was so dry that it did a little bit more damage than what I expected.”



O'Brien continues, "When you have a large amount of acreage that is lost, like (what) happened in this fire, it removes your ability to plan and to adjust your grazing."

Changes

With less grass in useable production, it's not surprising that changes are in store for affected cattlemen. Van Zandt, who retains ownership of his calves, is keeping about five fewer replacement heifers this year.

Van Zandt also says that, due to burned pastureland, a lot of hay has been brought into the area. Van Zandt himself doesn't feed hay, but rather utilizes little bluestem grass and 32% crude protein cubes.

"We try to stock conservatively for these kind of situations," he says. "In losing the acreage, I was getting in the mood to start culling. But now with this rain, I'll probably hold off on that for a little bit."

O'Brien has an operation similar to that of Van Zandt, maintaining a cow-calf operation and retaining ownership in the calves. He has taken measures to compensate for land lost in the wildfires. "We run a combination of a yearling operation and a cow-calf operation," he explains. "To adjust, we stopped buying yearlings."

O'Brien is also keeping fewer replacement heifers, both because of the wildfires and the current cattle market.

Perspective

"The outpouring of generosity for a wide area for cattle people and others that have donated feed and hay and cash has really been kind of amazing," Van Zandt says. "It's nice to know that the American spirit still goes."

Van Zandt considers himself lucky. His losses proved to be insignificant compared to many of his neighbors. "Especially when you consider people who have lost their houses, lost everything except the shirts on their backs. I know of one older fellow that didn't even have his hat.

"It's very discouraging," Van Zandt concludes. "I know people who have [been] completely burnt out."

O'Brien agrees. "There were a lot of people that were hit very, very hard."

Looking into the flames

Jared Murnin, American Angus Association regional manager for Texas and New Mexico, has seen first-hand some of the effects the Texas wildfires have had on cattlemen. "It's hard to comprehend just how big it really is," Murnin says. Wildfires burned just less than one million acres of land in the Texas Panhandle, and close to 4 million acres total across the state.

Murnin heard many stories from cattle producers at bull sales this spring. He particularly noticed that, while many cows escaped the fires, their calves didn't. "The cows could get away from the fire, but the calves got lost in the grass," he explains.

Murnin also mentioned how impressed he was that so many people are giving to those who lost land, fences and cattle.

"A lot of people are lending a hand," he says. "Even people who are still in drought conditions themselves are giving what they can."

Among those donating to the disaster area is Fort Dodge Animal Health. In late May the company announced they would be donating \$5,000 to the Cattlemen's Disaster Relief Fund. The donation will help Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico cattlemen rebuild their operations affected by wildfires, drought and other natural disasters that affected the area this spring.

The Texas Cattlemen's Association (TCA), the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association (TSCRA) and the Livestock Marketing Association (LMA) of Texas established the Cattlemen's Disaster Relief Fund with the Amarillo Area Foundation. Donations will help ranchers, producers and farmers replace fences, buildings, and cattle lost during the firestorms.

Other assistance programs are available as well.

"There are programs the federal government has in place for special emergency situations when assistance is needed quickly," Dan Childs, economist for the Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation of Ardmore, Okla., says. "Other assistance may be made available later as Congress has time to make the necessary assessments and appropriate funding."

Programs available from local Farm Service Agencies (FSA) include low-interest Direct Emergency loans and the Emergency Conservation Program. When applying for a Direct Emergency loan, "qualifications other than having a wildfire must be met for a farmer to receive these loans," Childs says.

The Emergency Conservation Program is a cost-share program designed to restore and replace damaged fences. Producers must have a minimum of \$1,000 of damage or loss.

"If qualified, the program will pay 75% of the costs up to a certain level to replace a fence and a lesser amount to restore a fence," Childs explains. He adds that producers should check with their local FSA office to determine exact payment amounts.

"The amount will generally decrease as the age of the fence increases up to 30 years," he adds. "No cost-share money is available to replace or restore fences over 30 years old."

Other programs offering assistance include the Texas Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). It "is considering a cost-share payment of up to \$10 per acre for a deferred grazing period in counties affected by wildfires," Childs says. The Texas State NRCS also allowed emergency haying until May 1 and emergency grazing until June 1 of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) land. Childs reminds farmers and ranchers to "modify their conservation plans at their respective county NRCS office if they plan to use CRP land for haying or grazing."

As more counties are officially named Presidentially Declared Disaster Areas, other assistance programs may arise. Items such as due dates of tax returns without penalties, low-interest loans, and direct assistance to ease the cost of feed and hay expenses are possibilities, Childs says. To help in getting assistance, Childs recommends producers keep records of current livestock numbers by class and receipts of feed, hay and fertilizer purchases.

